



Original communication

Lights, camera and action: Learning necrophilia in a psychiatry movie club

Gurvinder S. Kalra Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, M.D., D.P.M.*

Lokmanya Tilak Medical College & Sion Hospital, Sion, Mumbai 400 022, India

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ABSTRACT

Kissed (1996) is a serious film that portrays the disturbing and taboo issue of necrophilia in a delicate and viewer friendly way. Being a rare paraphilia, it may sometimes be difficult to get necrophilia related literature or even understand this complex behavior. An interested person may have to rely on the few case reports from forensic journals or law books in order to understand what and how necrophiles do what they do! A movie club can be an interesting and novel way to learn various issues in medicine and psychiatry, including necrophilia. This paper discusses the use of this film in academic sessions in order to learn necrophilia.

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1. Introduction

Necrophilia is a paraphilia wherein an individual experiences sexual attraction to corpses. It is a rare sexual perversion that is seldom reported to police, published in journals, or found in the forensic literature.¹ Data about necrophilia is hence very limited. Necrophiliacs are usually inaccessible, and infrequently consult the psychiatrist or other healthcare professionals.² Any attempt at understanding necrophilia as a condition would involve getting access to case reports in various scientific journals, descriptions in law books, or a few literary works that have been exclusively dedicated to necrophilia.³ A description of novel methods to learn this rare paraphilia has not yet been explored.

A movie club is an interesting method that can be used to teach and learn about different issues in medicine and psychiatry.⁴ This innovative method can be specifically used to learn in a variety of different settings where access to clinical material is limited for trainees or where the material to be studied is quite rare, such as necrophilia. Films about necrophilia are rare; this could partly be due to the rarity of this paraphilia which leaves the filmmakers along with the healthcare professionals with very little knowledge about it, and partly due to the offensive nature of the paraphilia. This paper describes the use of a film, *Kissed* (1996) to learn about necrophilia in a psychiatry movie club. However at the outset, it is emphasized that this is a film with a fictional character. With very

little scientific literature and knowledge available on this phenomenon, one should not conclude that this is the only way how necrophilia manifests in reality every time. The film and the central necrophiliac character within it enable a 'diagnosis' of necrophilia to be made according to the available knowledge about this paraphilia.

2. *Kissed*: the plot

Kissed^a (1996) is a film that deals with the subject of necrophilia narrating the story of Sandra Larson (Molly Parker), who as a child is fascinated by the experience surrounding death and later on as a young woman starts getting sexually attracted to corpses. When she meets Matt (Peter Outerbridge), a medical student, they become romantically involved. What begins as a romantic fling soon becomes Matt's quest to understand Sandra's obsession with the dead and ends with Sandra's quest about her own love for them.

3. Psychiatry movie club approach

Kissed can be screened at a movie club with a caveat that it involves some graphic scenes and hence viewer discretion is advised. The film makes more sense when screened in full, however one may only screen short clips for a focused discussion on necrophilia or while discussing paraphilias in general. Certain clips

* Tel.: +91 22 24011984, +91 9987279980 (mobile).

E-mail address: kalragurvinder@gmail.com.^a *Kissed*. Release year: 1996. Language: English. Director: Lynne Stopkewich. Actors: Molly Parker, Peter Outerbridge, Natasha Morley.

from the film that may be used in the discussion session are enumerated in Table 1, along with a brief overview of the course that the discussion can take during or after the film.

The film *Kissed* deals with a taboo issue very sensitively without giving it a shock value that a few other films based on the same issue do, such as *Nekromantik* (1987), *Nekromantik 2* (1991), and *Lucker the Necrophagous* (1986), making it more viewer-friendly compared to others. The acting of characters and its plot is believable; viewers can relate to them even though one is not likely to come across such cases commonly in practice.

Although necrophilia is mostly seen in males,⁵ there are also a few cases reported in females¹ and this film portrays necrophilia in a female character, Sandra. It however does not put her necrophilic desires in context to her life. For instance, the film plot does not get deeper into the reasons and circumstances that give rise to Sandra's different sexual tastes. There is very less data about her childhood, upbringing, parental relationships and household atmosphere and these could have very well helped one understand the phenomenology of this character's sexual preferences and behavior; for instance in the case of the famous necrophile, Jeffrey Dahmer (1960–1994) from the US, there was history of sexual molestation by a neighbor boy and troubled relationship between his parents that ended in divorce; both incidents may have contributed to his psychopathology.³ However it is worth noting that film plots may present incomplete stories similar to patients who may give incomplete histories in clinical practice.⁶ This deficit in the plot could be accepted in the light of already deficient knowledge about this rare paraphilia; moreover the character is strong enough to make the viewer believe that she could be necrophilic!

The initial part of the plot (portraying Sandra as a child) shows some of the early manifested behavioral patterns in childhood in necrophiliacs such as fascination with the dead, and dissecting animal dead bodies (Clips 1–4 in Table 1). Some of the most famous cases of necrophilia in the literature such as Sergeant Francois Bertrand (1824–1850) from the French army and Jeffrey Dahmer have been known to show a strange fascination with the dead early in life, when they developed a habit of dissecting dead cats and dogs.^{3,7} Another important and common childhood history that is seen in most necrophiles is that of head injury as was found in case of the famous necrophile Lam Kor-Wan sometimes referred to as The Hong Kong Butcher.³ However in the case of this film's character, nothing is portrayed to this effect.



Fig. 1. Sandra performing her 'ritual' before sexual intercourse with a corpse.

Sandra is shown to find herself a job at a funeral home which is well known in necrophiles, who prefer this profession in the first place because they were necrophiles or because it allows them free and unhindered access to dead bodies.⁸ Throughout the plot, it is also indicated that all the characters who are working in the funeral home are necrophiles which however seems to be an exaggeration of this fact (Clip 6 in Table 1).

The scenes that portray her ritualistic performances with the corpses before indulging in sexual intercourse with them are almost hypnotizing and surrealistic (see Fig. 1). However it is not clear as to how and where she learnt these rituals which are reminiscent of some cultural roots. It is also not known except in a few cases if the necrophiliacs actually engage in such rituals before they have sex with the dead bodies. The *Aghoris*, for instance, in Northern India are a mysterious and clandestine community known to live in cremation grounds, where they sit on corpses and use them for various rituals, including acts of necrophilia and necrophagia.^{3,9} They believe that such activities bring them closer to God and bestow them with great power. They are known to perform rituals especially with corpses of young women before engaging in necrophilic acts with them.

At the funeral home, Sandra's character intimately explores a deep relation and connection that she feels with the dead, treating them with all the dignity and respect that we otherwise

Table 1

Various clips from *Kissed* and the themes around which these can be discussed.

Clip (timing)	Description	Discussion theme
1. 00:02:20–00:05:32	This clip portrays how Sandra (as a child) has always been fascinated by the smell, feel and stillness of death. It shows her performing 'anointment' rituals with a dead sparrow.	Discuss childhood histories of some famous necrophiles.
2. 00:06:41–00:08:00	These clips show Sandra and Carol, her friend giving burial to dead animals, including chipmunks	See clip 1.
3. 00:08:20–00:10:55	where Sandra in her 'anointment' ritual scares Carol away.	
4. 00:12:26–00:13:25	This clip shows Sandra discussing how cutting into a body seemed dangerous and destructive to her, following which she is shown handling and tasting a dead mouse 'quite respectfully.'	Discuss the psychological aspects of necrophiles.
5. 00:19:55–00:21:50	Sandra kisses the dead body of a young man in a coffin for the first time while in a car-wash.	Discuss various acts that necrophiles may perform with corpses.
6. 00:29:22–00:31:10	Jan, Sandra's co-worker at the Wallis funeral home stares at the corpse of a dead woman at the funeral home when they both discuss Mr. Wallis and what they think about dead bodies having feelings of their own.	Discuss necrophilia classification. ⁸
7. 00:43:00–00:49:00	Sandra and Matt have sexual intercourse for the first time, following which she sneaks into the funeral home late night to get intimate with the corpse of a recently died man.	See clip 4.
8. 00:51:25–00:57:10	Sandra and Matt discuss some of her feelings about 'crossing over.' Later Matt reveals how he is also consumed with similar feelings.	See clip 4.
9. 1:02:30–1:04:15	Sandra comes to Matt's apartment where he is dressed in a suit and asks her to role-play an act of crossing over with him.	See clip 6.
10. 1:06:10–1:08:10	Sandra comes to Matt's apartment and finds him applying white talc to probably simulate blood-drained skin of a corpse giving her an indication that he wants to role-play with her again.	See clip 6.

Table 2The ten-tier classification of necrophilia by Aggrawal⁸ (Reproduced with permission).

	Tentative name	Major characteristics
I	Role players	Do not want to have sex with a dead person. Enjoy sex with a living person pretending to be dead.
II	Romantic necrophiles	Bereaved people, who would mummify a part of the body of their recently departed loved ones, and keep it with them in order to get a psychosexual stimulation. Would not show a similar interest in any other dead body, i.e. body of a person with whom they were not romantically involved in life.
III	Necrophilic fantasizers	Fantasize intercourse with the dead. May visit cemeteries and funeral parlors and may masturbate in the presence of the dead.
IV	Tactile necrophiles	Interest in dead bodies increases to the level of touching them. Like to stroke erotic parts of a dead body, such as breasts. May manipulate sexual organs of the dead in order to get an orgasm.
V	Fetishistic necrophiles	Cut up parts of a dead body – say a breast – mummify it, and keep it in their possession to use it as a fetish for their necrophilic activities. Differ from class II necrophiles in the sense that they (class V) do it with the bodies of strangers with whom they held no romantic relationship in life. Thus they do not do it merely to fill a psychosexual vacuum left by the death of their loved ones.
VI	Necromutilomaniacs	Interest in dead bodies is more than merely touching them. Necrophilic pleasure comes from mutilating a dead body.
VII	Opportunistic necrophiles	Actual sexual activity with the dead starts from this class. Normally these necrophiles would be content to have sexual intercourse with the living, but if an opportunity arose, would not refrain from having sexual intercourse with the dead. Necrophilic mortuary attendants belong to this class.
VIII	Regular necrophiles	The so-called “classic” necrophiles. They do not enjoy sexual intercourse with the living and prefer dead bodies for intercourse. They can however have sex with both living and dead persons. In this sense they differ from class X necrophiles, who can have sex only with dead persons.
IX	Homicidal necrophiles	This penultimate category is the most dangerous of all, in the sense that they would kill a person in order to have intercourse with him or her. They are however capable of having sexual intercourse with the living, but the need for sexual intercourse with the dead is so great that they must kill human beings in order to have sexual intercourse with their dead bodies.
X	Exclusive necrophiles	Sexual intercourse is possible only with the dead, with the complete exclusion of living partners.

give only to our living lovers. Towards the end of a few intimate scenes between Sandra and the dead bodies (Clips 1,5,7,8 in Table 1), a white light emerges onto the screen that could be interpreted as a cinematic representation of her orgasmic peaks that she reaches during intercourse with the corpses. Interestingly, these lights are not seen when she has sexual intercourse with her boy friend, Matt. Moreover after every sexual intercourse with Matt, she goes to have sexual intercourse with the corpse at the funeral home. It is a known fact that necrophiliacs may have normal sexual relations with living beings⁵; however their preferences may differ depending on the type of necrophilic tendencies that the individual has. To this effect one may refer to the classification of necrophilia by Aggrawal (2009) as seen in Table 2.⁸ As per this ten-tier classification, Sandra most likely seems to fall in the Class VIII or *regular necrophile* category, the so called “classic” necrophiles, who do not enjoy sexual intercourse with the living and prefer dead bodies for intercourse. They can however have sex both with living and dead persons. While Sandra has sexual relations with Matt, these scenes do not seem to project as much intimacy as the scenes between Sandra and corpses do, which may point to the fact that Sandra prefers dead bodies for intercourse (although this could simply be explained considering that the primary subject of the film is necrophilia). As far as Matt is concerned, it is difficult to typify his necrophilia. At one point he seems to fit into Class I (*role players*) going to the point of covering his body with whitish cosmetic to simulate the blood-drained skin of a corpse, indicating to Sandra that he wants to pretend-play (clip 10 in Table 1). He could also have auto-necrophilia wherein one imagines oneself as a corpse and gets sexual gratification out of it,⁸ which could also be the reason for the tragic end to the plot. At other points he also seems to fit into Class III (*necrophilic fantasizers*), who do not engage in sexual intercourse with the dead, but are simply content with fantasizing sexual intercourse with them. Matt appears to fantasize about Sandra having sex with the dead and since he also seems to be an auto-necrophile, he goes to the point of actually ‘crossing over.’ Interestingly, this seems to be the only way he could feel her love for him.

Although Brill¹⁰ characterized necrophiles as mentally deficient, psychotic, and incapable of obtaining a consenting partner, they may or may not suffer from psychiatric illnesses.^{11–13} A few famous necrophiles have suffered from psychosis or

schizophrenia, Winston Moseley (from New York) and Lam Kor-Wan to mention among a few.³ Jeffrey Dahmer is also supposed to have suffered from Asperger syndrome.¹⁴ Some may have other paraphilias in addition to necrophilia as in the case of Jerry Brudos (1939–2006) who had fetishism and transvestism, Thor Nis Christiansen (1957–1981) who had fetishism, and Jeffrey Dahmer who also had exhibitionism.³ Sandra, the necrophile character in *Kissed* does not appear to be floridly psychotic or mentally deficient or suffer from any other paraphilia and is very much capable of obtaining Matt, a consenting partner who later on falls in love with her. Whether she suffers from some psychiatric illness cannot be commented upon, although one may put forward differential diagnoses of cluster A personality disorder for her odd and eccentric behavior, relatively constricted affect, odd beliefs and magical thinking, indifference towards relationships and difficulty in forming close relationships (even in her childhood, when she is usually shown friendless).

4. Conclusion

Kissed is a rare film about an equally rare paraphilia of loving the dead that deals with this issue very sensitively in a non-gory way. Even though the film is not filled with curious plot-twists, it still keeps us glued to the story, showing just how compelled the necrophile feels to ‘cross-over.’ Sex and nudity in a few clips are more artistic and not vulgar or pornographic. It can be successfully used to learn and discuss necrophilia especially since very less is known about this paraphilia. Though readers can choose their own selections from a few other films on necrophilia, they need to understand that this film encourages discussion and can give new insights into this paraphilia especially when supported with important literature.

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Conflict of interest

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